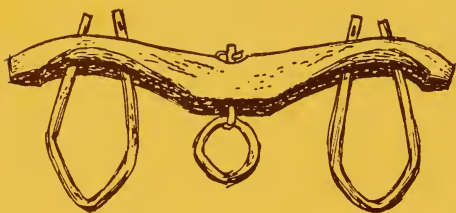


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REVIEWERS REVIEWED

A Challenge to Historical Critics

BY

OTTO EISENSCHIML

*A Paper Read at the William L. Clements
Library, University of Michigan,
February 9, 1940*

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FOREWORD

BOOK REVIEWING is a perennially unsatisfying business. If a reviewer praises a book, he may do so for any one of the following reasons: (1) because he knows and likes the author; (2) because he wants the author to be kind to his own (the critic's) next book; (3) because he had just had a good dinner; (4) because he knows nothing about the subject to which the book is devoted and plays safe by saying nothing against it; (5) because he really thinks it is a good book. On the other hand, a reviewer may criticize a book adversely for any one of the following reasons: (1) because he does not like the author; (2) because he is resentful that another has trespassed into a field which he (the critic) thought was his own private preserve; (3) because his breakfast did not agree with him; (4) because he has small knowledge of the subject and seeks to cover up his own deficiencies by being abusive; (5) because he sincerely believes the book is not a good one.

Not for a moment do we expect all professional reviewers and editors to agree with the above statements. But we suspect that some will agree with most of them, and most with some of them.

When Mr. Eisenschiml's book *Why Was Lincoln Murdered?* appeared in 1937, it provoked a good deal of criticism. After reading all the reviews that

were brought to his attention, Mr. Eisenschiml thought he was entitled to his day in court. For the mere sport of it, he wrote an answer to his critics, which presumably made him feel better. He let a few of his friends read his effusion and in this way it came to our attention.

The William L. Clements Library of the University of Michigan is committed to a specialty—American history. Since the subject of this paper is related to American history, we thought it might be fun to have Mr. Eisenschiml read it at the Library. We also thought that it would be most profitable to have as an audience a hand-picked group of men who really had read American history, who were accustomed to writing book reviews, and who were familiar with the book under discussion. From the University's Department of History came Arthur E. R. Boak, Verner W. Crane, Arthur L. Cross, Dwight L. Dumond, Arthur S. Aiton, Lewis G. Vander Velde, and Arthur R. Kooker. Political Science was represented by Jesse S. Reeves, Joseph R. Hayden, Everett S. Brown, and Arthur W. Bromage. Hobart R. Coffey and W. Wirt Blume came over from the Law School. From a group of Lincoln enthusiasts in Detroit appeared Thomas I. Starr and Frank B. Howard. Dr. Raymond W. Waggoner of the University's Institute of Neuro-Psychiatry, Colonel Basil D. Edwards of the University Department of Military Science, Clarence O. Skinner of General Motors, Roscoe O. Bonisteel, an Ann Arbor lawyer, and Forest H. Sweet, a

dealer in antiquarian documents, were among those present. On the evening of February 9, 1940, Mr. Eisenschiml read his paper in the Clements Library before this audience. Then began a discussion which lasted until very late. No one became abusive and no one was allowed to feel that he had the triumphant last word. That, we think, is not a bad way of reviewing a book.

Since it has become obvious that there were many others who would like to have heard what Mr. Eisenschiml had to say, we now present his paper for a wider audience. If any of Mr. Eisenschiml's critics would like a similar day in court, we would be glad to do for them precisely what we have done for him.

RANDOLPH G. ADAMS

Ann Arbor
March, 1940

REVIEWERS REVIEWED

A Challenge to Historical Critics

By OTTO EISENSCHIML

ABOUT THREE YEARS AGO I put before the reading public some hitherto unknown facts about the assassination of President Lincoln. Neither my book nor myself is important. What is important, I believe, is the type of historical criticism such a book encounters and which seems in universal vogue at the present. To illustrate my points I shall use reviews of my own book, although another book and another author, substituted for mine, would undoubtedly answer the purpose as well.

So far as I am aware, the facts I presented in my volume have never been seriously questioned. Their accumulation was a lengthy but not a difficult task; the difficulty lay in their proper interpretation. I did not feel then, nor do I feel now, that the evidence adduced by me permits a definite conclusion; but I hoped other historians would offer scholarly contributions on the subject, both factual and interpretative. The obvious possibility that the plot

against the life of President Lincoln may have been known or abetted by Northern men of influence should at least have been discussed and have incited a careful re-examination of the new material.

There has been no public discussion, I am sorry to say, and I have heard of no re-examination of facts. Although innumerable reviews have appeared, both favorable and unfavorable, no constructive suggestion has been offered, no new material published, confirmatory or otherwise. This is my first challenge to historians and historical critics.

Stepping from my environs among chemists into those of historians, I was impressed by the difference in their respective attitudes. New chemical thoughts always find a respectful and serious, if skeptical, reception. An advance into an uncharted region is proposed. The author's thesis is checked and tested; eventually it is either accepted or discarded, as results warrant. Never is the proponent's name unduly emphasized, nor are personal attacks made on him.

Thirty years ago I published, in collaboration with a co-worker, a new method for determining the presence of fish oils in vegetable oils.¹ Within a few days samples were sent by government institutions to chemists all over the world to check our results. Minor errors were discovered and modifications suggested. It took fifteen years before the chemical world signified its full approval of our

¹ *Journal of Industrial and Engineering Chemistry*, Vol. 2, No. 2. February, 1910.

method; only then did the United States Department of Agriculture adopt it as official. I doubt that during this entire period our names were more than mentioned. Certain it is that we were neither praised to the skies nor dragged through the gutter. The work was considered more important than the authors, which is as it should be. No one cared whether we were university graduates or sewer-diggers. The only question was whether our discovery was a genuine advancement in science or not.

One vainly looks for such a detached attitude in most historical commentators. The tone of their reviews struck me as particularly astounding; I would not have expected to find it among people who brush their teeth. This is my second challenge to historical critics.

“‘This indefatigable historian,’” writes J. G. DeRoulhac Hamilton for instance,² “to employ the highly inaccurate title used in the publishers’ blurb to describe the Viennese Chemist who is the author of this unique volume . . . Between the posing of the question [*Why Was Lincoln Murdered?*] and this utterly inconclusive reply to it lie (no double entendre intended) four hundred and thirty-eight dreary pages of rambling and disconnected implication and innuendo . . . The reader wearily puts down the volume, wondering if the author fails to grasp the fact that a considerable number of people in the country can read and that a good many do so . . .”

² *North Carolina Historical Review*, October, 1937.

Can anyone come closer to figurative spitting?

If Hamilton's tone is regrettable, his methods are more so. In the first place, he attacks the publishers' advertisement as if it were part of the book. Authors are not responsible for book covers. I for one did not know what would be on the jacket until the book was on the market. Criticizing authors on this score is like cursing the wrong man and constitutes a sorry waste of valuable venom.

Mr. Hamilton laments the "utterly inconclusive reply" to the question which forms the title of my book. It might have occurred to him that the very title, put in the form of a question, indicated lack of sufficient data for a definite answer. Or was this too subtle a suggestion for one who pounds out his comments with a baseball bat? Some day, Mr. Hamilton, when and if I know all the answers, I may publish a volume entitled *Why Lincoln Was Murdered*, and there will be a period after the last word, not a question mark. Simple entendre.

A new thought is not necessarily brought to its climax by its author. To that end, more often than not, a number of investigators have to put their shoulders to the wheel. Between Hertz, who discovered a certain ether wave, and Marconi, who finished the first radio sender, many brains cooperated. According to Hamilton's type of historical critic, Hertz proved nothing and his experiments were "utterly inconclusive." Right. But Hertz did start something important; and if his ideas brought results it was not due to his contemporaries calling

him names. Perhaps Hertz should have withheld his discovery until the radio was perfected; perhaps automobiles should not have been put on the market until they were 1940 models. It is a debatable question; nevertheless, the idea lingers that streamlined cars may not have been developed at all, if their coughing and jerking predecessors had not broken the trail for them.

Charles R. Wilson, in the *American Historical Review* for January, 1938, seconds Mr. Hamilton in condemning me for using innuendoes. "The casual reader," he writes, "is led . . . to infer certain 'appalling implications' [again the poor back cover] which the author apparently believes but for which he prefers not to take responsibility." Posing on his lofty pinnacle, Wilson scornfully points to the book as "written by a Chicago chemist with a flair for history." No innuendo, Mr. Wilson? No implication for which you prefer not to take responsibility?

Professor Wilson, by the way, has achieved something in his review which is granted to few mortals. He has out-Don-Quixoted Don Quixote. "Parker [Lincoln's bodyguard] could hardly have been 'criminally negligent,' " he writes, "yet have intercepted both Hanscom and Booth." Nowhere in my book did I state that Parker intercepted these two men, nor did he. Don Quixote only fought windmills; Charles R. Wilson erects them first and then heroically demolishes them.

Why, I ask, Hamilton's and Wilson's outbursts against chemists? Why this sincere or assumed con-

tempt for my profession? The Lincoln literature counts among its recognized authors ministers primarily taught to believe, lawyers largely guided by authorities, newspapermen, librarians, poets, physicians, politicians. Chemists, who are above all trained to unearth truths, are *de trop*. Mr. Hamilton intimates with commendable delicacy that shoemakers had best stick to their last. Has he applied this platitude also to authors in other professions, and if not, why not?

Both Mr. Hamilton and Mr. Wilson evidently wish to establish the closed shop in history. No union card, no historian.

A very human hypothesis may explain this specialized professional hostility. A chemical factory I know emits curious odors at all times; nevertheless, the neighborhood does not complain. Newcomers do, but the old inhabitants laugh the smell off; in fact, they claim it is good for their colds. But woe if a new odor arises with which the population is not acquainted; no matter how inoffensive, everyone is outraged, and the health department has one of its busiest days.

* * *

One of my critics, Professor W. B. Hesseltine, apparently laid down my book with a smile of superiority.

"Ten years ago," he quoted from the inevitable book jacket,³ "Otto Eisenschiml . . . became interested in finding out why Gen. Grant hurriedly left

³ Madison (Wis.) *State Journal*, April 18, 1937.

Washington on the day of Lincoln's assassination. The answer should have occupied five minutes in a reference room . . ." Come now, Mr. Hesseltine, how could you be sure after five minutes that you had the right answer? Is this the way you gather your own historical data? R.S.V.P. But I do not think you will.

"With no opposing attorney to object," Hesseltine continues, "and no presiding judge to rule on the evidence, the advocate has a free hand in presenting his case to the jury." Who, pray, opposed Mr. Hesseltine in his review and who ruled on his criticism—not to mention his bias? If Galahads only possessed a sense of humor!

However, the distinguished professor does furnish some factual contribution to the mystery of Lincoln's assassination. "The telegraph wires were grounded by some of the conspirators," he declares. Whence this knowledge? *Where are your references, Mr. Hesseltine?* For years I have tried to solve the knotty problem of that interrupted telegraph service, and I am still far from satisfied; and all this time Professor Hesseltine has had the answer in his vest pocket. A medical student was once asked at an examination what cure there was for cancer. "An hour ago I knew," he stammered, "but now it has slipped my mind." "Great heavens," exclaimed the professor, "there stands the only man who could cure cancer, and he has forgotten how!"

To this class of critic I venture to offer a suggestion: Try to be somewhat consistent—and please

don't leave all your parlor manners at home when you go author-hunting.

* * *

A sly method of discrediting books is the deliberate use of deprecating words. Miss Ida Tarbell, for example, tells her readers that "The author's purpose sticks out from the start."⁴ Milady uses a rather plebeian expression to announce her detection of something that was never meant to be hidden; nonetheless, I suspect her of knowing that poison darts can kill as effectively as a broad-axe.

Mr. Hamilton also is adept in toxicology. I wonder if anyone would have stumbled over his puny pun of "lie (no double entendre intended)" if he had not emphasized it; and having held it up to his readers for inspection and ridicule he drops it and disclaims any unfriendly intention. This is the same Professor Hamilton who is such an avowed crusader against the use of insinuations and innuendoes—by others.

Miss Tarbell employs other questionable tactics: She embodies in her review an entire portion of my book (the part dealing with Mrs. Lincoln's jealousy of Mrs. Grant) as if it were the product of her own historical research, although she quotes directly from one of my chapters. The effect of this stratagem is twofold: It makes the reviewer appear erudite and the author dull-witted, uninformed.

Allan Nevins appears to qualify for a seat on the same bench. Referring to my book (without the

⁴ New York *Herald-Tribune*, March 28, 1937.

courtesy of naming it) as a "bizarre hypothesis", he adds, with the dictatorial authoritativeness of the schoolmaster: "As a matter of fact, the assassins had plotted the murder of the supposedly radical Johnson as well as Lincoln."⁵ As a matter of fact, Professor, the assassins had done nothing of the kind; and to imply that I overlooked such a self-evident lead is unkind. I devoted a large part of a chapter (pp. 166-174) to the discussion of this fake plot. An outstanding critic ignores portions of a book because they do not fit into his argument. Yet, commentators who misquote, directly or by implication, are entirely within their rights. There is, unfortunately, no law which compels a reviewer to read a book carefully—or to read it at all, for that matter—before he criticizes it.

From this kind of reviewer there is only one step to the well-known species who, instead of criticizing the volume he is supposed to discuss, engages in a development of his own ideas. He struts up and down the lines of his column displaying his knowledge and his theories, forgetful of the fact that he is writing a review of someone else's book and was not invited to write a treatise himself. Everybody feels that he will cheerfully disembowel his authors for the sake of marketing a few nitwitticisms of his own.

⁵ Allan Nevins: *The Gateway to History* (D. Appleton-Century Co., N. Y., 1938), p. 225. It is only fair to state that in a letter to the author Mr. Nevins interpreted the word *bizarre* as *unusual* and disclaimed any derogatory meaning.

Critics who fail to familiarize themselves with the book on which they pass judgment or who abuse their prerogatives by talking about themselves instead of their assignment should be disqualified and excused from further service.

An odd sort of reviewer is the one who, after taking a few lusty wallops at the author, admits that he is really not capable of reviewing the book at all. Professor F. L. Herriott in the *Des Moines Sunday Register*⁶ treated me without gloves; but an editorial note at the conclusion of his tirade confides to the reader that his "studies [of Lincoln] have been made only up to Lincoln's first administration"; which brings to mind the story of the man in the stage coach who knew all about Beethoven, Newton and Shakespeare, but had no idea who Washington was. When asked why, he said that he had read the encyclopedia only to the letter T. "We are asked to believe . . .," writes Herriott; no, no, Professor; you are not asked to believe anything; you are only asked to read beyond Lincoln's first administration before you criticize a book dealing with subsequent events.

Parenthetically, the use of the words "we are asked to believe" is the unfailing thumbmark of the reviewer who prefers catch-phrases to arguments. Let me explain, Professor Herriott: If you are asked to believe something, the something may be true, even if you don't think so. Galileo's judges also probably rose in indignation when they were asked to believe that the earth revolves; but it does.

* * *

⁶ April 4, 1937.

One of the fundamental principles of fair play provides that no rules of a game shall be changed while it is in progress. Professor Hamilton, quoted earlier, evidently entertains a different opinion, for he establishes a new rule in his review. In sketching Stanton's character against the background of Lincoln's assassination, I had to draw on well-known sources. This is not to Hamilton's liking.

"He [the author] adds nothing," he writes, "to the knowledge [of Stanton] already possessed by students of the Civil War . . ." Here then is his startlingly new doctrine: No writer must relate a twice-told tale. Out goes almost every book on history, for not everyone can, like Hamilton, find a subject of such primeval originality as *The Life of Robert E. Lee* which, I am sure (although I have not read it), contains one hundred per cent new and original data, including Lee's birthplace and the battle of Gettysburg.

Mr. Charles Hanson Towne, who writes syndicated reviews, also hints at a new principle for historical writers. "Engrossing material here," he comments on the book, "about people who have passed on, and therefore are unable to reply."⁷ From now on all criticism must stop at the grave, says Towne. No more books on Nero, Benedict Arnold or Jesse James. They are dead and cannot reply.

Some critics are obviously not satisfied to be prosecutor, judge and jury in one; they appoint

⁷ San Francisco *Examiner*, March 26, 1937.

themselves law-makers as well whenever it suits their purposes.

Two words much favored by my commentators are *innuendo* and *insinuation*, and much virtuous indignation have they spilled over them. May I point out to these sensitive souls that science knows no insinuations—only possibilities and probabilities worthy of further investigation? A physician finds that a certain treatment benefits typhoid fever patients; his results cover only a limited number of cases, and he hesitates to draw definite inferences. He publishes his results so that others may take over from that point. If that be insinuation, let them make the most of it.

* * *

My fault-finding is all with methods, not with men. I suspect that our present system of reviewing is more to blame than the reviewers themselves. The reviewer is invited to sit in an armored car, as it were, and shoot with a gun at the helpless author who has no means of hiding or counter-attacking. Such power is bound to breed despotism, and manifestly it does. I am writing reviews myself, and I keenly feel the injustice of the prevailing practices.

Is there a remedy? In historical magazines, where considerable time elapses before the review appears, an advance copy could easily be sent to the author. The ensuing correspondence should enable the editor to delete some outstanding errors, misunderstandings or acts of injustice. In daily papers, where

such a procedure is less practicable, the authors should at least be given the privilege of correcting outright misstatements. This privilege, of course, must be limited in its scope. Each reviewer must retain the indisputable right to voice his opinion. When Professor Hamilton, for instance, wrote that there are so-and-so many dreary pages in my book, he was as much entitled to this statement as was Professor Schlesinger of Harvard who remarked that he did not know when he was so fascinated by a book;⁸ but when critics misquote or misunderstand, the author should be allowed to protest. True, some journals do permit the author to reply to his detractor; but the latter is allowed a rebuttal and, knowing that he has the last word, usually takes this opportunity to slaughter his victim completely. The author, by keeping quiet, will generally choose the lesser evil.

I have developed a habit of sending a copy of my review to the author, particularly when I don't agree with him. Only once have I been similarly favored, and I still recall with respect that writer in some out-of-the-way lumber journal whose editorial slashed me into pink ribbons. To present me with a copy was chivalry in reverse, so to speak. but still chivalry; it deserves imitation.

There is one more principle I should like to see established by literary editors. I think that nothing should be criticized by the reviewer but the book itself. The personality of the author, his place of

⁸ Washington, D. C., *Tribune*, April 10, 1937.

birth or residence or any other of his private affairs, should not be weighed in the balance. Some reviewers even publish the author's off-the-record communications to them or to others. I think this is downright reprehensible.

The reviewer occupies a quasi-judicial position. The evidence before him should be the book and nothing but the book. If a man is in court accused of treason, the judge will exclude all evidence proving the man guilty of speeding, pocketpicking, murder or any other crime for which he is not on trial. Among literary and historical critics flagrant violations of this ethical rule abound. Sometimes they work to the advantage of the author, sometimes they do not. Private and confidential correspondence or conversations between the author and the reviewer are often quoted; most of it makes gossipy reading, but, like most gossip, is out of place in intellectual circles.

I dislike and mistrust critics of the gushing kind who go into ecstasy instead of settling down to the job of criticizing. In many such instances author and reviewer are connected by ties of close friendship. I remember cases in which critics dwelled at length on recent visits by the authors to their editorial sancta. Should a judge undertake to preside at a trial if either the plaintiff or the defendant is a friend of the family? Would he publicly declare that a man before his bar had only a short time ago supped at his house? On the other hand, would any fair jurist or juror sit in judgment over an accused who is his personal enemy?

May I add one word about the use of reviews for advertising material? On book covers and advertising pages excerpts from reviewers' pens serve to make the book more attractive to prospective readers; unfortunately, I have never seen any but favorable comments employed for this purpose. This is neither fair to the author nor to the reader. If truth in advertising be demanded for face creams and baking powders, why not also for books?⁹

* * *

Despotism always has brought out the worst in human nature. Our reviewers today are despots, free to do as they please, without restraint, without fear of a comeback. This despotism, like all others in history, will eventually die of its own abuses. In the meantime, would it not be advisable to draw up some Marquis of Queensbury rules to give the sport of reviewing at least a semblance of fairness?

I have suggested the rudiments of such a code in this challenge. There is no intention on my part to be personal. I harbor no ill feelings against my critics and I am not personally acquainted with any of them. If it were not necessary to quote examples I would have preferred to omit all references to individuals, including myself. There is more at stake than any one book, any one author or any one reviewer.

Professor Nevins has proposed that a magazine of history be founded as a forum for the exchange of

⁹ I induced the publishers of my book to add two outstandingly adverse comments to eleven favorable ones in a large advertisement in the *New York Times* of April 18, 1937.

historical thoughts.¹⁰ It is one of the finest suggestions brought forth in recent years. Such a forum might give authors an opportunity to fight their battles on even terms with their prosecutors. Until then, however, and perhaps even after then, a code of ethics for historical reviewers does seem desirable.

¹⁰ *The Saturday Review of Literature*, February 4, 1939, p. 16.

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